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ABSTRACT

A study investigated language choice within families in a small (population 1,100) Inuit community in rural northern Quebec province (Canada). Since the settlement's formation 40 years ago, the population has become increasingly interethnic, with people speaking a mixture of Inuktitut, English, and French. Subjects were 23 couples with children aged 9-24 months, including 56 percent Inuit, 40 percent mixed heritage of Inuit with white, and 4 percent white. While all Inuit residents speak Inuktitut, it was found that only 76 percent spoke Inuktitut at home. Overall, 44 percent spoke Inuktitut only, 52 percent spoke mixed Inuktitut with English and/or French, and 4 percent spoke English only. Mixed couples often spoke a combination of languages. Case examples are offered of four couples: an Inuk mother and Inuk father using languages differentially with different children; a family with mixed-heritage mother and Inuk father consciously using English only; an Inuk mother and French father each using their second language, English, with each other, and a combination of languages with the children; and a mixed-heritage mother and English-speaking father using primarily English, but in which the mother uses Inuktitut with the children when alone with them. Issues emerging from these varying language situations are discussed. (MSE)

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WHO SPEAKS WHAT LANGUAGE AND WHY? : LANGUAGE USE OF FAMILIES IN AN INUIT COMMUNITY

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WHO SPEAKS WHAT LANGUAGE AND WHY? : LANGUAGE USE OF FAMILIES IN AN INUIT COMMUNITY

Parents in communities where there is rapid language and culture change face particular discourse issues as they construct the language and culture of their homes. Among such issues are decisions about who will speak to whom in what language as well as decisions about what patterns of language socialization will be adhered to in the home. Such decisions are sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious. Inside the home issues such as gender, status, and cultural patterns of deference combine with community influences including the language of education, historical, political and economic realities. This paper is about the particular decisions and influences that families from the community of Kuujjuaq in Arctic Quebec face as they engage with and in the discourse patterns of their families. Such decisions are a crucial but as yet little investigated pivotal point in situations of language loss.

Kuujjuaq is an Inuit community of approximately 1100 people located some 1000 kilometres north of Montreal. It is accessible only by a two hour jet plane ride and by ship for a few summer months. Despite this geographic remoteness it is, nevertheless, the gateway community to Nunavik or Arctic Quebec. Since the formation of the settlement forty years ago, the population of Kuujjuaq has become increasingly interethnic with people who now speak a mixture of Inuktitut, English and French. Population statistics from 1991 (Dorais, 1992) reveal that Inuit comprise 81% (865 people) of the population out of which

100% can speak Inuktitut, 58% also speak English and/or French, and 42% speak no English or French. The non-Inuit population is comprised of 200 people or 19% of the total population, 60% of whom speak French and 40% of whom speak English and virtually none of whom speak Inuktitut.

Despite the fact that 100% of the Inuit population speak Inuktitut, Kuujjuaq is a community undergoing rapid social and linguistic change with considerable potential for language loss. This means, then, that the important question, is not who can speak the language but rather who does, to whom, and in what ways. Furthermore, in order to fully understand the process of language loss, it is necessary to study, among other things, how children in such a community go about acquiring their language and how their families create the language learning environment of the home. Clifford Pye (1992) has reminded us that language loss can be seen as a kind of defective bilingual acquisition. Indeed, the data reported on here are part of a larger study that will eventually look at the specifics of language acquisition and socialization in this Inuit community where languages and cultures are in daily contact.

In a first stage of this research project, we have focussed on the 23 couples in Kuujjuaq that have children between the ages of 9 and 24 months. The ethnic composition of these partnerships is as follows:

Inuit with Inuit-56%

Mixed Heritage or Inuit with White- 40%

All White- 4%

However, language use in these homes does not correspond to ethnicity. For instance in homes where both parents are Inuit, one quarter of the families speak a mixture of Inuktitut and English. The remaining 76% are reported to speak predominantly in Inuktitut in their homes.

Actual language use in the 23 families, then, was as follows:

Inuktitut only- 44%

Mixed Inuktitut with English and /or French-52%

English only-4%

This means that language is used in various ways in the different families. For instance, Inuk-Inuk couples may either speak Inuktitut only or a combination of Inuktitut and English. Couples where both partners themselves grew up in mixed language homes speak a combination of Inuktitut and English. Finally partners where one member is non-Inuk and the other is Inuk or of mixed heritage speak predominantly in English even if the non-Inuk father's mother tongue is French.

Twelve of the 23 families were interviewed in depth about their language use, their perceived language competencies, decisions about language use, and their language socialization patterns. The following four exemplar families demonstrate the range of language use in the homes of young children in Kuujjuaq as well as some of the main issues that impinge upon these families' choice of language.

Family 1: Inuk mother-Inuk father

This family is comprised of a young couple with three children under 5 years of age. Both parents had schooling through Grade 8 entirely in English. They only speak Inuktitut with their one year old son and their two year old daughter. However, they use both Inuktitut and a moderate amount of English with their 5 year old boy. When asked why they spoke English to this particular child, the mother explained that she was preparing him for school. The irony is that the child will go into an Inuktitut only stream in kindergarten next year and not receive English instruction until Grade 3. The Mother in this family speaks Inuktitut and English to the father whereas the father speaks only in Inuktitut to the mother. The grandparents who frequently babysit the children speak only in Inuktitut to them. Their aunts and uncles speak mostly Inuktitut mixed with some English to the children. The mother states that her language of preference for her children is English. When asked why, she said, " so they can get work". This couple said that they had not made any conscious decisions about language use strategy. The mother described the language situation in Kuujjuaq in these words,

> It is floating in the air. It is everywhere. Everybody is talking English and Inuktitut If nobody does something about it Inuktitut will disappear. When the grandparents are gone, unless one of my age have perfect Inuktitut, there will be no more Inuktitut. There would be some but not that much. Nobody my age has strong Inuktitut, not that I know of. If we were really serious about keeping our language then we would have to cut off TV, English radio, books, and just have Inuktitut in school. [If my child did not speak Inuktitut he would be] not real Inuk but still Inuk.

Family 2: mixed-heritage mother-Inuk father

This young couple lives with with their firstborn girl child. The parents have had their education in English up through college level. They have consciously decided to speak English to each other and Inuktitut to their child. When asked about this decision, the mother said,

> We mainly spoke English at home when I was a child. My Dad hardly understood a word of Inuktitut and my Mom knew more English than my Dad knew Inuktitut....when I was five I lost my language in NWT and had to relearn it. That's why I don't feel as comfortable in Inuktitut as I should. [That is why I speak to my child in Inuktitut] because I want to preserve my Native language and my Mom made a conscious effort with her youngest child. She told my Dad she would only speak to her in Inuktitut and that was to make sure she had a good understanding of Inuktitut.

This mother then has followed her mother's pattern of language use with her child and yet has continued the bilingual nature of her upbringing by speaking English to her husband. The paternal grandparents speak Inuktitut to child. The maternal grandparents, both of whom are now non-Inuit due to the original mother's death, speak English to each other and yet try hard to speak only in Inuktitut to the child. Their Inuktitut proficiency is limited but they were the only non-Inuit relatives in our study who decidedly attempted to speak Inuktitut to a child.

The mother underlined the importance of being trilingual both for herself and her child and related this importance to economic realities. At one point in the interview she succinctly summed up the issue by saying , "French looks good on your curriculum vitae."

Family 3: Inuk mother-French father

This couple has two girls under 4 years of age who are exposed to a mixture of languages. The mother and father speak their second language, English, to each other. Neither of them are fully proficient speakers of this language. The mother speaks English and Inuktitut to the children whereas the father speaks English and French to the children. The mother speaks no French and the father speaks no Inuktitut. This couple have not consciously made a decision about language use in their home nor have they communicated any such decision to their extended families. The maternal extended family speaks in Inuktitut to children. The paternal grandparents see the children only rarely when the father takes them south to visit. In this home the television is on 16 hours a day in either French or English. The father describes his beliefs about the language proficiency of his daughters in the following way,

> [when they are five] they will play around in all three but they are not gonna be perfect in one of them. [They learn these languages] because we are speaking like that. The Mom speaks Inuktitut, the father speaks French and we speak English at home and we speak English outside everywhere. The English they are going to learn in the school and everywhere. So we have to show them all three. The Inuktitut is from her [points to Mom].

His comments reflect how English is the lingua franca of the community and the workplace in Kuujjuaq. This family and the next one both look to the mothers and the school to provide substantial Inuktitut input to their children.

Family 4: Mixed-heritage mother-English father

This couple also has two children under four years of age. Both parents speak English to each other and to the children. The mother who grew up in a bilingual home herself also speaks Inuktitut to the children but only when the father is not present. The children spend the day five days a week with a French-speaking babysitter. The father described what he considered to be the family's strategy for language use. His wife said she was not aware that they had a conscious strategy. The father's concept is that the children will learn Inuktitut from the mother and at school although he himself admits that his wife is prohibited from speaking Inuktitut or playing Inuktitut language radio or television in his presence. He says it makes him uncomfortable to have his wife and children speaking Inuktitut because he cannot understand it.

In the interview, the parents expressed their perspectives on their situation in this way:

> Mother: "I feel like I failed [this interview], just listening to [my husband's] answers.
> Father: "I think people, not to belittle you dear, but I think where I have come from in the south and now I am living here I can look at things more than [you]...I'm not as limited in what I'm thinking. Do you now what I mean?"
> Mother: "Not exactly, no."
> Father: "You are thinking more like here because you have been here all your life. They could go south.
> Mother: "So where I am scared to move down...."
> Father: "You do not think about as much as I do because I lived there all my life so I tend more to think about any possibility rather than limiting ourselves to staying here, depending on...everything changes with time, situations.
> Mother: "OK I think I am done."

In this interchange the father reveals that he thinks he has a less limited perspective on their situation due to his life in other parts of Canada. He does not acknowledge the fact that his wife has had a life time of experience living with and learning two languages.

These case presentations of four families point to a number of issues. They are issues that concern boundaries, strategies, and power. In most of the homes there were fluid boundaries with no conscious decisions about strategies for language use. Some of the families could be characterized as openly and naively optimistic. They expressed the belief that their children would learn at least two languages and that this would be accomplished with no systematic exposure to the different languages in question. Although all of the families we interviewed thought that language was learned by what children heard around them, this knowledge was not often connected to structuring the environment of overheard language.

Some families described strategies for language use that they did not adhere to. In one case, the mother had just finished explaining that she always spoke Inuktitut to her son when she turned and asked the child in English if he wanted his hair cut. Clearly, stated beliefs and actual behaviour differ and need to documented in successive stages of our research. Furthermore, the relationship of Inuktitut to Inuit identity was not clearly defined by most of the families we

interviewed.

At the other end of the continuum were examples of rigid boundaries. English-speaking fathers had the clearest of these boundaries. They only spoke their first language, English. At least one did not tolerate Inuktitut in his presence. Another form of rigidity was a father's decisions about language use that had not been communicated to his wife. Some of the non-Inuit fathers belittled their wives' thoughts on matters of language. The rigidity of these men's boundaries, the compliance of the wives, and the stated superiority of certain men indicates to us a power and/or gender differential. It is also possible that Inuit cultural values make Inuit wives more deferential.

Finally, there were couples that made compromises, some of which may be misguided. French-speaking fathers and their Inuit wives chose to speak English, a language in which they were not proficient. In one family, the parents spoke English to each other but not to the child. This strategy effectively meant that English was overheard and had the potential to become a desirable and high status language in the home.

In conclusion, these findings from 12 families indicate a variety of patterns of language use in the homes of young children in Kuujjuaq. The strategies for language use that were adopted reveal a lack of understanding of both bilingual acquisition and the conditions that favour the simultaneous learning of two languages. They also indicate a host of pressures that impinge on individuals living in a situation of language and culture contact. There are economic pulls,

schooling concerns, media accessibility, cultural patterns, gender and power differentials, all of which impose themselves on the daily lives of people who are simply trying to create linguistic expression and comprehension with their partners, in their children, and across their extended families. However, the danger of unclear, undecided, and under-informed discourse boundaries is one of loss. In Kuujjuaq, as in the work of Wong-Fillmore (1991) on immigrant families of the United States, one feels the threat of subtractive bilingualism in the guise of the kind of uncertain environment for bilingual acquisition that Clifford Pye (1992) warns us is the heartland of a community losing its language. It is crucial to realize that the threat of language loss is manifested not only in the language policies of schools and governments but also in the daily conduct of families' discourse with their small children.

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